

5.3 Highlights in the Settlement History of Renfrew County

Len Hopkins
Co-Chair, Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee

Renfrew County follows the Ottawa River from Arnprior all the way to the Township of Head, Clara and Maria upriver from Rolphton. It is the largest county in Ontario. Before human presence, the Champlain Sea stretched as far inland as Deep River. The original shoreline of the Champlain Sea passes through Petawawa.

The modern settlement history of Renfrew County begins with today's Arnprior, Braeside, and McNab along the Ottawa River. In 1825, McNab Township included today's Arnprior, Braeside, and McNab. It consisted of a strip of land about six miles wide along Lac des Chats (Shaw), which was a deep clay deposit dating from the Champlain Sea. While much of McNab Township had excellent agricultural land, in parts of the township the surface was a challenge to farm.

Chief Archibald McNab, the 13th Chief of Clan McNab, immigrated from Killin, Scotland, to Upper Canada in 1823. He then went to York (later Toronto), the provincial capital and proposed to the Government that he settle a township with his clansmen. The Laird of McNab was given directions to a surveyed township which he later called McNab. The Laird himself was granted 1200 acres. He then wrote to his cousin in Scotland, Dr. Hamilton, to send out settlers. Laird McNab built Kinnell Lodge near the mouth of the Madawaska River, in today's Town of Arnprior. Later he built Waba Cottage at White Lake, which has been restored.

The Laird of McNab was given authority to issue patents to settlers that included stipulations similar to the feudal system that the new settlers had faced in Scotland. The Family Compact made a "private" understanding between the Chief and the Government to the effect that the Chief was to have for his own use and benefit all the timber growing on the township. The settlers rose up against him and the government had to step in to investigate. In August 1841 an order-in-council arranged for the settlers to gain title to their land.

McNab lost control over the settlers and eventually returned to Scotland. Arnprior, Braeside and McNab, all on the Ottawa River, became separate communities. The Ottawa River played a major role for transportation in this area of Renfrew County, and the first settlers chose their lots along the waterways.

The name Arnprior comes from the association with the McNab family in Scotland. It received this name in 1831 by the Buchanan Brothers who operated the first sawmill in the town. An "Arm" is a small stream in Scotland and a "priors" was a monastic house presided over by the prior or a prioress on the Arm's shore. Shortly after the Laird of McNab departed for Scotland in 1843, Arnprior and the Township developed separately. Daniel McLachlin came to the town eight years later and transformed Arnprior into a thriving lumber centre. He surveyed the Town into lots and gave them to the residents. As a result, he has always been known as the father of Arnprior.

Continuing up the Ottawa River, the mouth of the Bonnechere River enters the Ottawa at Castleford in Horton Township. When the first survey was made of Horton Township in 1825 it showed that Horton had two qualified farmers – both on the Ottawa River. Later some settlers came from McNab and others came up the Ottawa to the famous Farrell's Landing. This was the beginning of the Opeongo Line settlement road on the shore of the Ottawa. This Government Road was supposed to join the Ottawa River to Georgian Bay in order to settle the land in between. Ultimately, the Opeongo Line fell victim to competing railway development and ended between Madawaska and the eastern border of Algonquin Park.

The road was rough, stony, and with corduroy roads through swampy areas. Settlers from Britain, Ireland, Holland, Germany, Poland, and Scotland came up the Opeongo Line. Many settled in the immediate area, but others, such as the Germans, Polish, and Irish, settled in the communities in the beautiful hill country of Renfrew County. Polish settlers took up many farms in Wilno, named after Vilno in Poland because it reminded them of their homeland; Wilno, located in Renfrew County, is the oldest Polish settlement in Canada. Irish and Scottish settlers founded communities as well. In many homes, German and Polish are still spoken.

Upriver, Ross Township contains both good agricultural land and other areas that have rock outcroppings. White water rafting in this area has become a major part of the local tourism industry, attracting several companies and many daring tourists.

Champlain's Astrolabe was found by a farm boy, Edward George Lee, then 14 years old, near Green Lake, Ross Township, in 1867, and is believed to have been lost by Samuel de Champlain about June 7, 1613. It is now in the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa after being repatriated from the New York Historical Society in New York City. Harold Dobson of Cobden led the effort to have Champlain's Astrolabe returned to Canada in 1989.

Pembroke Township was been named after the Welsh County of Pembroke. Robert Gourlay corresponded with the Earl of Pembroke seeking settlers to the area. Both the former Townships of Pembroke and Stafford have strong agricultural bases and industry.

Today's Town of Petawawa was settled by large numbers of German families. There were also many early French speaking settlers as well as First Nations Peoples. Petawawa is said to have been named after an elderly First Nations woman living on the banks of the Ottawa River in the 1800s.

In 1905, the Federal Government purchased land from many of the German and French settlers, providing them with land in a neighbouring township. The area became Camp Petawawa, today the Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, one of the largest military bases in Canada. This year Base Petawawa is celebrating 100 years on the Ottawa. Base Petawawa contains almost 100 square kilometers of land and its shoreline on the Ottawa extends for about 16 kilometres. Base authorities have spent six million dollars cleaning up the beaches and unexploded shells along the shore of the Ottawa River.

The present Town of Deep River was built to house employees of the Chalk River Laboratories. This move followed the decision in 1944 to build an atomic plant on the Ottawa River, 8 kilometres east of Chalk River Village. The Town of Deep River is said to have more professional engineers, scientists, and trades than any other Canadian community of 4500 people.

The former Village of Chalk River and the former Townships of Rolph, Buchanan, Wylie, and McKay saw their heyday during the timber and lumber boom. The same was true of the Townships of Head, Clara, and Maria at the northern end of the County of Renfrew. Some “bush camps” and “crown cutting” operations still exist. The Village of Chalk River went from being a logging town to a CPR Divisional Centre and today is home to many AECL employees as are the other townships.